

CATHERINE PELONERO

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A TRUE ACCOUNT OF A PUBLIC MURDER
AND ITS PRIVATE CONSEQUENCES

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Skyhorse Publishing

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NOTE TO THE READER

THE RE-CREATION OF events in this true story was at all times done as accurately as possible, drawn from a wide variety of sources that were corroborated and cross-referenced to whatever extent possible. A list of sources and references is included at the end of the book.

In a few instances, pseudonyms have been used to preserve privacy. Some names, mainly those of surviving assault victims and certain others whose identities are not central to the story told here, have purposely been omitted.

FOR MY FRIEND, *JOE DE MAY*

MY MOTHER, *TRIEVA PELONERO*

AND MY HUSBAND, *JOSH BREWSTER*

WITH MY LOVE AND GRATITUDE

Covered with ashes, tearing my hair, my face scored by clawing, but with piercing eyes, I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shames without losing sight of the effect I am producing, and saying: "I was the lowest of the low." Then imperceptibly I pass from the "I" to the "we." . . . I am like them, to be sure; we are in the soup together.

The Fall by Albert Camus

INTRODUCTION

IT WAS THE location, many later said, that gave a heightened sense of horror to what happened. Kew Gardens was not the type of place where anyone expected prolonged screams to shatter the middle-class serenity. It was not a neighborhood where anyone expected to find bloodstains on the sidewalk or bloody handprints on storefront windows, a macabre trail to the site of an unspeakably violent end.

Kew Gardens is in Queens, a borough of New York City that sits east of Manhattan and connects it via bridges and tunnels. Queens is bordered by the waters of Long Island Sound on the north and Jamaica Bay to the south, and eastward lies the aptly named Long Island, a lengthy expanse of towns and villages that eventually shrinks to its end at the Atlantic Ocean.

Queens had steadily gained residents throughout the 1950s and into the next decade as the populations in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx continued to decline. By 1964, Queens was not only the largest borough in land area at more than four times the size of Manhattan, but also had a population in excess of 1.8 million. Yet in spite of its prominence in size and populace, and the fact that Queens had been chosen as the site of the upcoming 1964 World's Fair, the *New York Times* did not have a full-time reporter assigned there.

Queens had little to offer in terms of news value. It was simply a place where ordinary people lived unremarkable lives, officially part of New York City but actually a collection of distinct communities that operated somewhat like independent towns rather than neighborhoods in the nation's most prominent urban behemoth. Of course, the very factors that made it unappealing to a major news outlet had the opposite effect on regular people in search of a nice place to call home.

Kew Gardens was one of the jewels of the borough: an upscale neighborhood with low crime, gracious apartment buildings on its main streets, and impressive single-family homes—including several early twentieth century mansions—resting in classic splendor on its tree-lined side streets. In March 1964, only four months after the assassination of President Kennedy, with crime on the rise and the tensions of the Civil Rights Movement threatening to erupt, Kew Gardens evoked a sheltered stability; a community still softly aglow with staid and demure charm, almost a rebuke to the rapid changes and sense of uncertainty ushered in with the new decade. Kew Gardens looked and felt like a good neighborhood with a slower pace, almost a throwback to a gentler time—one of the few such areas left for the middle class in New York City. It was the kind of place where people *aspired* to live.

This perception of safety and decency explains, in part, why a single murder on a cold winter night sparked a cataclysm in a city that had over five hundred homicides in the prior year. The *where* escalated the shock, but the reports of what was done—and not done—while the blood flowed and the screams echoed transformed another urban tragedy into a globally publicized gasp of horror. The chain of events told and retold in various abridged versions in streams of front-page headlines and magazine articles, on television and radio, and eventually even in folk songs and plays, quickly came to symbolize not only the worst in human nature—and most distressingly, the apparent moral vacancy to be found in regular “good people”—but also became the launching pad for a new field of psychological study.

As for the community at the focal point, the collective cry of outrage rained down upon it with the sudden ferocity of a flash hurricane, catching them unprepared, unguarded, scrambling for shelter in wide-eyed disbelief, and further finding themselves trapped in a storm of pelting criticism that abated but never completely ceased, rising and ebbing like the piercing wail of the trains that thundered through its center day and night, year after year.

The questions arose, publicly and repeatedly. How could this terrible thing have happened? Where

had this awful change in society come about? *Why did decent people stand by doing nothing as a atrocity played out in front of them?*

Experts in human behavior were at a loss to explain. So began a clinical quest for answers. Scholars and psychologists embarked on years-long studies with alchemistic zeal, stirring great cauldrons of research and experiments in an attempt to conjure the key to this strange, seemingly new phenomenon.

Gradually, an image took shape: But the observers found themselves staring at something that looked less like a phenomenon and more like the reflection of a mirror. The specter that emerged resembled not a black-and-white portrait of uncommon evil, but a kaleidoscope of human instincts and reflexes, prejudices and fears, callousness and cruelty; startling not because they were foreign, but familiar.

| PART ONE |

FEAR OF THE STRANGER

I was seven years old when it happened. There was a patch of grass in the rear of the buildings alongside the train tracks where we would play ball and a big bush where numerous intercepted catches and fumbles ended up. For years afterward, no kid wanted to fetch a ball that had found its way into that bush. We “knew” there was a murdered girl in there. She had—I have no idea where we got this number from but we all knew it—38 wounds in her body. She was waiting there to get us. We used to ask why. The answers varied between, “That’s a long story,” and “Because you didn’t save her . . .”

Of course, the fact that it happened in this “idyllic” neighborhood had a lot to do with it. If it had happened in the South Bronx, I don’t think it would’ve even made page 15 of the Daily News.

—Peter Mueller, former resident of Kew Gardens

chapter 1

FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 1964

IF SHE HAD walked out onto Jamaica Avenue a minute sooner or a minute later, he would never have seen her. They would have missed each other entirely.

But he did see her.

He saw a young woman getting into her car, alone.

He had been searching for her for more than an hour. Not this woman specifically; he had never seen her before, and that also was key. The other keys were “woman” and “alone.”

The woman, when at last he found her, had been easy to spot since there was no one else around and very little traffic at this time of night, at least not here in Queens. Streets in Manhattan may still have been busy at 3:00 a.m. but he wouldn't know, since he never did this kind of thing in Manhattan; only in Queens. He felt more secure in Queens, especially around this area, since he lived nearby.

And that was another key—sticking fairly close to home, because at some point after the thing was done, he had to get home and check his dogs and his kids, and get some sleep so he could be ready for work in the morning. He always showed up at the office on time, no matter how late he had been on the night before.

Nothing in particular about this woman had caught his eye, other than the feminine shape and the skirt she wore, both of which assured him that the figure stepping out into the darkness was female, and she looked young.

He slowed his car and watched as she stepped off the curb and walked around to the driver's side of a red sports car. Perhaps he held his breath as he waited to see if anyone would join her, or his heart beat faster when he looked in his rearview mirror and saw that no one had, that she was definitely in the car alone, now pulling away from the curb; but it was just as likely that he remained steady and calm because control was something he *always* maintained. Control and discipline. Equally important to him were preparation and organization, traits he showed in both his career and home life, and in situations like this one now. The gloves he wore tonight were not just to protect his hands from the biting cold, nor was the purpose of the stocking cap he wore solely to keep his head warm. He also had another hat with him—a dark brimmed fedora—and he wore a three-quarter length overcoat that looked indistinct, bland and common color, with a pocket deep enough to hold a long bladed hunting knife.

He made a U-turn as the little red sports car shot ahead down Jamaica Avenue and turned the corner onto 188th Street. She drove fast and he had to pick up his speed to keep up with her—and that *was* exciting, chasing her like this, because he had never had to do that before. She drove on to the Grand Central Parkway and he followed at a safe distance until she exited at Queens Boulevard. Now they were driving on side streets, first one and then another, the little red sports car and a white Chevy Corvair making all the same turns. The last street onto which they turned was still and silent, its boundaries lined with tall trees, bare of leaves now in the final grip of winter. The street was called Austin, though the man did not know it at the time, as he was not familiar with this neighborhood. But he thought it looked just right, exactly the kind of place to which he hoped she would lead him.

The red car made a final turn into a parking lot. The white car crept ahead on Austin Street and stopped on the street in front of a bus stop. Quickly he shut off the engine, stepped out, and closed the door, careful not to slam it.

The woman was still in her car as he stood some yards away in the shadows, facing toward her

waiting. Standing at the edge of the parking lot, he vaguely noticed it was a Long Island Railroad station. ~~A few other parked cars sat dark and empty, windows frosted from the night air. Off to the extreme right sat a small commuter train depot, deserted at this hour. Directly ahead stood a pale, two-story building, a Tudor-style structure, unlit and noiseless. No one was around. No one at all, except himself and the young woman who now stepped out of her car and into the cold and silent darkness.~~

She closed the door of the little red car.

He slid his hand into the deep pocket of his coat.

She was standing by her car door with the key in the lock when she turned her head and saw him, thin, small man in a stocking cap, over at the far end of the parking lot, looking at her. He had already taken a few steps in her direction and now, as she looked up and it was clear that she had seen him, he wondered if he had fouled this up; moved too soon and given himself away. He worried she would get back in her car. With some relief, he saw that she did not.

She was walking now. She turned and strode quickly toward the building in front of her, veering to her right in the direction of the building's rear entrances down a wide alleyway adjacent to the train tracks. Her brisk walk betrayed an urgency, and it could be that an awareness had dawned on her of how alone she was at this moment, alone in the gloom and chill with the odd man in the parking lot, if suddenly they were the only two souls left on earth. She hurried along, turning her back on the man, and that's when he came at her faster. He was not quite running, not yet, but he quickened his pace and came rushing across the parking lot, his right arm held down at his side so she would not see the hunting knife gripped in his gloved hand.

She looked over her shoulder and saw him again, the stranger who had been staring at her, and the feeling of uneasiness she may have felt a second before turned into panic. Now she knew. *He was coming for her.* There could be no doubt. He was coming for her and she needed to do something.

Suddenly she changed direction, darting sharply to her left and running full speed up toward Austin Street. She must have seen him change his course to intercept her, or perhaps it was simply instinct and fear and panic compelling her because by the time she set foot on the corner of Austin Street she screamed at the top of her lungs "Help!"

"HELP!" again as she dashed around the corner, the man now in full pursuit. She kept screaming—"HELP! HELP!"—as she ran down Austin Street toward Lefferts Boulevard, past the corner drugstore, a tiny grocery, a dry cleaner, and now a bookstore, all shuttered for the night.

It was 3:20 a.m. There was only one business on this block that could have been open at this hour and that may have been where she was headed, to the safety of a neighborhood bar called Austin Bar & Grill, just four more doors away.

But he caught up to her now between the bookstore and the liquor store and she stopped running suddenly, clumsily, halted by a knife thrust in her upper back that turned her cry of "Help!" into a tremendous piercing shriek. Again he plunged the knife into her upper back and her long scream intensified. She fell to her knees on the sidewalk with the man standing above her, his knife poised, and for a second they remained this way, the man panting, flushed, exhilarated, the woman shocked and stricken, perhaps disbelieving. She raised her head and screamed, "*Oh my God, he stabbed me! Help me! Somebody please help me!*"

As if her shattering cry were a cue, the man bent over and lunged the knife at her again. Instinctively the woman crouched lower as he continued to jab at her.

Another young woman, this one watching through a window in an apartment building across the street, thought the man was beating the screaming woman, who was now crouched almost flat on the pavement, her wounded back parallel to the sidewalk. But in fact he was stabbing at her again and the

knife connected twice more in her back before two other screams, both male, sounded from across Austin Street. The first was the angry voice of a young man, reacting to the clamor outside with a shout of, "*Shut the fuck up!*" The second followed immediately after and this one came booming from a window high above, a more mature and commanding male voice demanding, "*What's going on down there!?*"

The man in the stocking cap jerked upright and looked up into the blackness, startled and suddenly fearful. Across the street stood an immense ten-story apartment building that ran the length of the entire block. Lights were coming on, first one and then another and another, as if a giant stone creature had suddenly awakened and begun to open its many rectangular eyes. He was standing straight across from a recessed entryway to the building where lights in the lobby shone through a large bay window. Worse, he and his shrieking victim on the sidewalk were directly beneath a street lamp.

The booming male voice from above—it sounded like the same one—shouted again, "*Leave that girl alone!*"

The man in the stocking cap turned and darted down Austin Street back toward the train station. Some who watched him go saw him disappear into the darkness as he ran past the parking lot. Others were able to see him get into his car, throw it in reverse, quickly back it down Austin Street and then, still in reverse, up a one-way side street called 82nd Road.

The injured young woman lay alone on the sidewalk in front of the bookstore. She was no longer screaming, but crying—the pitiful, unguarded weeping of a child.

"Help!" she called out through sobs. "If somebody doesn't help me I'm going to die!"

Any reply she may have hoped for did not come. The street was once again silent except for the sounds of her own plaintive weeping. No one stirred or peaked out from the Austin Bar & Grill; it had closed early tonight. All of the businesses were deserted. Some of the apartment lights that had snapped on a minute before went dark again. Some people went back to bed. Of the others who remained at the windows, a few felt they could see the street better with their inside lights off.

The woman tilted on her side and slumped over on her back, facing up toward the night sky and the yellow glow of the street lamp above, blood from the wounds in her back forming fresh stains on the pavement beneath her. Almost immediately she tried to get up and away; but, as one onlooker later described it, she was not having an easy time of it. Her legs moved as if in slow motion as she tried to regain her bearings and stand. She rolled to her side, propping herself on an elbow, and gradually climbed to her feet. A few faltering steps got her to a nearby parked car, which she leaned on for support. From there she lurched to a tall tree by the curb, resting for a moment against its trunk. Pushing off from the tree, she bent unsteadily and grabbed something—her wallet?—from where it had fallen on the sidewalk. Slowly she started down Austin Street the way she had come, back toward the corner drugstore at the edge of the train station parking lot.

Accounts of how she moved would vary. Some would describe her as staggering, others as walking "dreamlike." One woman watching from a second-floor apartment above the bookstore described her as zigzagging down the street. However she moved, it was a labored journey. Her winter jacket had tempered some of the hunting knife's thrust; her wounds were not very deep nor imminently fatal, but two had reached far enough to put small punctures in each of the lobes of her lungs. Air slowly leaked into her chest cavity. The incisions were sharp, and the shock and fear that surely coursed through her could have overshadowed the physical pain, might have pushed it into the background as a lesser and perhaps almost minor cog in this solitary nightmare. What she certainly felt other than a need to find help was a mounting pressure in her chest, a gradual tightening that slowly but steadily gained intensity with every step and breath, as if a python had coiled around her, making each inhalation a little

more difficult than the last. The constriction added to her fear and desperation but also drove her forward toward the promise of salvation; her attacker had fled and she had only to make it to the safety of home, not terribly far away. Less than a minute's walk from here, normally. She kept moving down Austin Street, accompanied by the sound of her own crying and mumbled pleas and eyes that peered at her through windows up and down the block.

Midway to the corner she retreated to the building for support, groping along the walls of the storefronts. She passed the darkened windows of the dry cleaner, the grocery, the drugstore—businesses she patronized during the day. The building she now clung to housed sixteen apartments, all on the second floor, one of which was her own. The entrances to most of the apartments, including hers, were in the rear along the wide walkway next to the train tracks.

She rounded the corner and continued inching along the side of the building. The train station parking lot was now to her right. Directly beyond the lot stood a seven-story apartment building where a man and his wife on the sixth floor watched the young woman make her way toward the rear walkway. They would both later say that the woman definitely staggered at this point and that her movement had slowed from what it had been on the opposite side of Austin Street. Others who still had her in view would agree.

Partway along the side of the building—and now several minutes into her ordeal—panic overcame her. She cried out, *"I'm dying! I'm dying!"*

This outburst, coupled with the fresh horror about to come, caused at least two people listening to think the woman had been attacked again, here next to the parking lot. That was not the case, however. The woman's cries were yet another reaction to her deepening mortal distress, and perhaps the certainty that she would not be able to go much farther.

She made it to the next turn at the far edge of the building, where a darkened coffee shop with large glass windows overlooking the walkway occupied the ground floor corner lot. Laboring past the locked door of the coffee shop she came finally to an unlocked door—an apartment entrance. Clutching the door knob, she pushed inward with her remaining strength. The man and his wife up on the sixth floor across the parking lot watched her disappear inside, watched the door close behind her.

It was right after this that the man with the hunting knife returned.

He no longer wore a stocking cap. He now wore a dark fedora on his head, but it was him—the same slender young man who had pursued the woman down Austin Street some ten minutes before.

He sauntered past the parking lot. His hands were in his pockets as he walked down Austin, the ten-story apartment building on his left, looking this way and that, searching. He came to the front of the bookstore where he had first stabbed the woman. He looked in the empty doorways and glanced up and down the street. Finding nothing, he turned and strolled back toward the parking lot, scanning the area with his eyes. People watching from the ten-story building strained to keep him in view as he moved in the direction of the train depot. Others in private homes on the block and the seven-story apartment building had a more clear view of his movements.

About the time the man reached the locked train depot, looked around, and then headed for the rear walkway, the man on the sixth floor reached for his phone. "I'm calling the police," he whispered to his wife. "Don't!" she insisted. "Thirty people must have called by now."

The injured woman had entered a small foyer, a narrow and dingy entryway with peeling paint on the walls. There were no inner doors on the ground floor. Instead there was a set of stairs in front of her leading up to two apartment doors at the top. Neither of these was her own apartment; hers was farther down the walkway, only a few doors down, but she knew she could not make it that far. She needed help right away. Certainly it was fortunate that she had made it here, because one of the people who

lived upstairs was a friend of hers.

~~She may have tried to make it up the stairs or she may have fallen to the floor soon after the out~~
door closed behind her. Either way, she came to rest at the base of the narrow hallway and shouted up
the stairs.

“Karl! Karl, help me. I’m stabbed!”

It is unknown whether Karl opened his door at this point. What is certain is that he reached for his
phone—and called a friend of his in Nassau County.

In a strange and brief conversation, Karl told his friend about the woman calling for help at the
bottom of the stairs. He asked his friend what she thought he should do. She told him to call the police.
He hung up the phone.

“Karl! It’s Kitty. I’ve been stabbed. Help me!”

Spurred to action, Karl climbed out his window and stepped out onto the flat inner roof of the
building. Hurrying through the frosted darkness on the roof, he came to the window of an adjoining
apartment and knocked heavily on the pane. The woman inside this apartment was startled by his
banging, though she was already wide awake. Frightened—especially with all the screaming and strange
activity that had been going on outside—the woman hesitated before going to the window. It was only
after the man insistently knocked again and called, “It’s your neighbor! I’m on the roof!” that she finally
drew the shade and opened her window. She and her neighbor faced each other through the open
window. They heard moaning from the hallway below.

“I heard screams . . .” the woman began. Her neighbor interrupted and quickly said he didn’t hear
screams, since he was sleeping. Before he could say more, another call came from below.

“Help me! It’s Kitty.”

They looked at one another. “Call Sophie!” he said. “She lives next to Kitty. Tell her to come over and
see if it’s really Kitty.”

She replied that she did not have a phone and she didn’t know Sophie’s number anyway.

The moaning continued.

“I don’t want to get involved,” Karl said. “I want somebody else to come over and see if it really
is Kitty.” He added, “I think she’s drunk.”

The woman told him she had a phone number for Greta Schwartz, another neighbor who lived
at that end of the building. He took the number and quickly left, leaving the woman staring after him as he
scurried back across the roof to his own apartment.

She walked into her bedroom. This was all so very odd. Her husband was in the bedroom and she
said to him, “There’s a woman moaning in Karl’s hallway.” She thought of the police call box on the
corner of Austin Street and Lefferts Boulevard. “Do you think I should go down and call the police from
the call box?”

“No.”

THE MAN IN the fedora was about ready to give up. He had searched for several minutes, but his
victim was nowhere to be seen. He stood at the top of the walkway next to the train tracks and looked
down the long silent concrete path. He tried the door to the coffee shop on the corner. It was locked. He
thought she must have made it home, for surely she must live around here. On impulse he tried one last
door—the next one. A plain brown entry door. 82-62 Austin Street.

She was lying on the floor. She looked up at him and let out a horrific scream—her last. People standing
at their windows around the other side of the block heard her last two cries of “HELP! HELP!”

The door closed behind him. And then he was upon her.

He straddled her where she lay and plunged the hunting knife into her throat to silence the scream. ~~Unable to cry out, she moaned and struggled as he squatted down on her and cut open her jacket and blouse.~~ She raised her gloved right hand in an effort to push him away but he slashed at her outstretched hand with the knife, cutting deep enough to tear her glove open and slice her palm. He cut through the center of her bra and discovered that her breasts were not as big as he had thought. She wore falsies. Infuriated by this, he slashed her right breast. Still she continued to twist and struggle beneath him, and now he was really fed up with her—fed up with her deception with the falsies and her defiance in *st* trying to get away. He took the hunting knife and stabbed her in the stomach, once, twice, and then again and again, not using all his strength, not deep enough to cause immediate death, but enough to make her still.

Now, finally, he could do what he wanted.

He pulled up her skirt. Underneath she wore layers of clothing—girdle, tennis shorts, nylons, and panties. He took the knife and cut through them all as the woman lay motionless and bleeding in the dank stairwell, moaning through the hole in her throat.

A door at the top of the stairs opened.

The man glanced up. Unfazed, he turned his attention back to his victim.

The door at the top of the stairs closed.

GRETA SCHWARTZ COULD not quite make sense of what her neighbor Karl Ross was telling her. What time was it, anyway? Close to 4:00 a.m. it looked like. She tried to listen carefully and understand him because there must be a good reason for him to call her at this hour.

Greta and her husband lived in one of the rear apartments down near Lefferts Boulevard. Karl babbled something about screaming on the street. *Screaming?* Greta did not know what he meant. She had been sound asleep until the phone rang. Karl said something about Kitty being hurt in his hallway and then something about calling Sophie to come over and check on her. It was confusing.

Greta knew who Kitty was—one of the two young girls, the dark-haired one, who lived across the hall from young Sophie Farrar and her family. Close to sixty years of age herself, Greta considered them all young. None of this was making much sense and she could not understand why Karl would be asking her to call Sophie in the dead of night. There must be something going on though. Greta told Karl she'd be right over and hung up the phone. She threw on a robe and slippers and went downstairs.

Stepping outside into the walkway, Greta turned right and walked toward the entrance to Karl's apartment down near the corner. There was no one else on the street. She had no idea that a man in a fedora, headed in the opposite direction toward Lefferts Boulevard, had passed by only a moment before.

Greta reached the door of 82-62 Austin and pushed on it, but it would only open a few inches. It seemed there was something inside blocking the door. She put pressure on it and forced the door open enough to slip inside.

Strange, raw smells filled the air, different from the usual stagnant musty odor of the narrow stairwells. It looked like somebody was lying on the floor. Greta looked down, straining to see in the darkness. As her eyes adjusted to the dim of the hallway she saw that it *was* Kitty lying there. She heard a moan. Kitty's skirt looked like it was hiked up. She must have fallen, Greta thought.

"Kitty?"

Instinctively she bent down to fix Kitty's skirt—and that's when she saw.

Greta Schwartz could not even find her own voice to scream. The sight of the carnage in front of her would haunt the rest of her days.

Greta scrambled up and clawed her way outside. As she fled the blood-drenched stairwell she thought, *My God, she's still alive*, but the thought was tinged with more pity than relief.

RIGHT AROUND 4:00 A.M., at an intersection near Hillside Avenue and the Van Wyck Expressway in Queens, a man had dozed off behind the wheel of his parked car. A passing motorist waiting at the traffic signal noticed the man asleep in the car and also noted that the car was idling. He pulled his own vehicle over to the curb, approached the sleeping man's car, and tapped gently on the glass to rouse him.

Now awake, the man rolled down his window and looked into the pleasant face of a young man wearing a fedora.

"You shouldn't be sleeping here like that," the man in the fedora said in a placid, kind voice. "The carbon monoxide builds up. Or somebody could come along and do something bad to you."

"Yeah, you're right," the man replied, grateful for the stranger's concern. "Just drifted off. You're a good fella. Thanks."

The Good Samaritan in the fedora nodded and smiled, returned to his white Chevy Corvair, and drove off.

chapter 2

SOPHIE FARRAR LIVED in the Tudor building on Austin Street with her husband and their two young children. The building, which ran the length of the block from Lefferts Boulevard to the train station parking lot, was a modest structure by neighborhood standards, smaller and shabbier than the rest. Locals referred to it simply as “the Tudor.” It had only two stories, the ground floor occupied by a string of storefront businesses and the second floor housing sixteen walk-up apartments, with entrances to all but four of the apartments located in the rear, adjacent to the tracks of the Long Island Railroad.

The night of March 12–13, 1964, had been even quieter than usual since the Austin Bar & Grill, on the first floor of the Tudor near the corner of Austin and Lefferts, had closed earlier than normal, as had the pizza parlor around the block on Lefferts. As the pizza parlor manager later told police, he had closed early due to it being such a slow night. Patrons and employees were long gone by the wee hours, leaving Austin Street silent and lifeless.

Until about 3:20 a.m.

“Did you hear that?” Sophie Farrar’s husband nudged her awake. He had awoken just a moment before, jolted from sleep by a piercing noise. In the darkness of their bedroom Sophie now heard it too—screams, loud and frightening, coming from somewhere outside.

Screams in the night—ghastly, visceral cries like these—were not the norm in this neighborhood. Not in Kew Gardens, this solid middle-class community of working people and retirees. Nights were usually so peaceful and subdued, which is perhaps why the screams were heard by so many people.

Sophie had no idea who else had heard them. In the isolation of her own apartment Sophie knew only that she and her husband heard something terrible—shrieks that chilled her to the bone and sent her stumbling out of bed to her window overlooking Austin Street.

Peering out, Sophie saw nothing but the usual sights: the gray concrete façade of the Mowbray apartment building across the street, partially obscured by the branches of winter-stripped trees; parked cars sitting frosted and dormant by the curb; stretches of bare sidewalk lit dimly by the yellow glow of street lamps. Through her closed window she could not see the sidewalk directly beneath her. She had no view of anyone lying on the pavement down the block in front of the bookstore, or staggering alongside the storefronts of her own building.

She stayed at her window for a minute or so, looking out and listening for anything unusual, but she remained quiet. For Sophie Farrar, tranquility had returned and the night looked as still and unperturbed as always. She returned to her bed, awake and uneasy in the darkness, unaware of what had happened, unsuspecting of what awaited her.

Sophie was a petite woman in her thirties whose slender, delicate frame belied her strength. Her husband worked long hours, leaving her with the responsibility of running their small but active household. Her days were spent caring for her baby daughter, getting her son off to school, and managing an insulated but busy life with the self-sufficiency common to working-class homemakers. She rarely went out during the day. When she did, she stayed close to home.

Directly beneath her apartment was a small upholstery shop called Fairchild Decorators. During the eight years Sophie had lived here she had become friends with the owner, a man named Tony Corrado. Tony and his family lived a couple blocks away on Talbot Street, but he spent a good deal of time at his business, which had been there for the past fifteen years, since 1949. *Nothing ever happens in Kew Gardens*, Tony often said with a measure of satisfaction. Many people would likely have agreed. Sophie Farrar said later that what happened next was her first experience with violence, in Kew Gardens

anywhere else.

~~Twenty minutes after Sophie heard the screams she was jolted once again by another shrill sound~~ the night: the ring of her telephone. She picked it up quickly, perhaps as eager to answer before it would wake her children as she was to find out who could be calling.

Greta Schwartz, possibly in a state of shock, probably overcome by panic, had rushed back to her own apartment after finding Kitty. She called Sophie.

Answering her phone, Sophie listened to Greta's voice, frantic, breathless. Greta explained—tried to explain—what she had seen. It came down to a single jarring sentence.

"I saw Kitty lying in Karl's hallway and she looked like she was dead . . ."

Dead? Kitty, their neighbor? Dead?

Sophie told Greta she'd come right down. She hung up the phone, bewildered. "I never thought of murder," she said later. "I put on my slacks and ran down to see what was wrong with Kitty."

Kitty and her roommate, a shy and pretty young blonde named Mary Ann, lived in the apartment across the hall from Sophie and she knew them well, particularly Kitty, who was the more outgoing of the two. The Farrars lived in the larger front apartment overlooking Austin Street. Kitty and Mary Ann, who had moved in just last spring, occupied the rear unit facing the railroad tracks. They shared a common entrance at street level in the rear of the Tudor. The address was 82-70 Austin Street.

And that was something—why was Kitty in the hallway at 82-62 Austin, down at the other end of the building? Karl Ross lived there. Kitty and Karl were friends, so maybe Kitty had been visiting him. Whatever the case, the only important thing was to find out what happened to Kitty.

Sophie rushed down the stairwell and out the street-level door, stepping into a biting blast of winter night air. Greta met her and they hurried down the walkway, shivering more with trepidation than from the near-freezing temperature. Only later did Sophie question whether she would have run outside had she known the situation, had she known she was dashing headlong into a bloody scene where a killer might still be lurking. As she later said, "I ran to help. It seemed the natural thing to do. I never thought of myself in danger."

Reaching the entrance at 82-62 Austin, Sophie pushed the door open and stepped inside. Entering the gloom of the hallway, she heard a low moan and looked down.

Sophie Farrar, young mother and homemaker who had never known violence, let out a gasp.

Kitty lay flat on her back, her head facing the door, as if she had tried to climb the stairs and had fallen backwards. But even in the darkness it was obvious this was no accident. Kitty's grey skirt was hiked up to her waist. Her shoes were off. Her legs were splayed and her blouse and undergarments torn apart.

Perhaps the motherly instinct in Sophie had become a reflex or perhaps she simply reacted to a friend in mortal distress; she dropped to her knees and slipped her arms around Kitty's back and shoulders, cradling her as she would one of her children.

"Kitty! Kitty, what happened? What happened?"

Kitty instantly tensed at Sophie's touch. Her hands came up in a weak pathetic flail of defense, still fighting off her attacker.

"Kitty, it's Sophie . . . it's *Sophie!* It's me . . . I'm here . . ."

Kitty must have understood. She relaxed, the tenseness in her body subsiding. She moaned. Her mouth was agape, her narrowed eyes rolling, blinking. She moved slightly inward toward Sophie's embrace, toward the last comforting human touch she would ever feel, and Sophie saw the holes in the back of her coat. Sharp slices in the fabric of the upper back.

"Kitty, who did this to you?" Sophie asked. Guttural noises came from Kitty, but nothing Sophie

could distinguish as words. Kitty moved again, a slow-motion thrash from the warmth of Sophie toward the cold wall stained with her own wet blood. “That’s when I saw that her throat had been slashed,” Sophie later recalled. Slipping her arm from Kitty’s back, Sophie now saw blood, all over her own hands.

The shock, the sheer horror of it all, made it almost beyond belief, as if Sophie had somehow stepped not into a hallway in her own apartment building but into some strange macabre universe. Sophie may have vaguely wondered how she got here, to this nightmare, this unthinkable gruesome scene, with the freezing air swirling in and the warm blood soaking her, the sounds of Kitty’s moans and the plaintive muttering of Greta Schwartz, standing behind her saying, “That poor girl. That poor, poor girl . . .”

Sophie placed her hand behind Kitty’s head, holding her so that they faced each other, hoping Kitty could see her, hoping she would know someone was here, someone who wasn’t going to hurt her. “I’m here, Kitty, I’m here . . .”

It was then that a different fear washed over Sophie. Where was the man who did this? Where was he now? *What if he came back?*

And Sophie felt as Kitty surely had—vulnerable, scared, keenly aware of her own helplessness. What if the man came back now, while she was on her knees in this cramped hallway, alone with an elderly woman and another dying in her arms?

* * *

About this time the killer cruised along Hillside Avenue toward the Van Wyck Expressway, tossing certain items out of his car as he drove. Personal items, belonging to a woman whose name he did not know. He would check the newspaper tomorrow, find out her name, though their names never mattered to him. He’d find out if she lived or died. He got that kind of information from the newspapers, like everyone else.

He would not return to Kew Gardens. Not tonight. Not for a few more nights.

* * *

Someone else appeared in the hallway. Whether Karl Ross spoke or whether Sophie just heard him on the stairs is uncertain. Later it would be difficult to recall what was said in those frantic moments except Sophie’s three words to Karl: “Call the police!”

Finally, he did.

AT 3:50 A.M., the 102nd precinct of the New York City Police Department in Richmond Hill, Queens received a call of an assault on a woman at 82-62 Austin Street in Kew Gardens. Patrolman Peter Volber responded to the scene at 3:52 a.m.

Officer Volber parked his patrol car in the railroad station lot next to a late model red sports car. The sports car—a 1963 Fiat—had been parked here less than forty minutes before by the victim he now approached. The walk from the parking lot to the spot where he found her was a mere fifty feet.

The police officer took one look at the mangled woman lying on the floor and immediately radioed back to his precinct. He reported a serious assault and requested an ambulance and assistance of two detectives from the 102nd precinct. The desk dispatcher put him through to the second-floor squad room, and Officer Volber briefed Detective Mitchell Sang: white female, unconscious, apparent stab wounds sustained from a serious assault.

“How serious?” Sang asked.

“You might want to notify Homicide.”

~~AWAITING THE AMBULANCE~~, Sophie stayed with Kitty and spoke words of comfort that she could only hope were somehow registering. ~~Greta Schwartz and Karl Ross stood shivering outside the door of 82-62 as Officer Volber asked the standard questions.~~

“What is her name?”

“Kitty Genovese.”

Officer Volber scribbled in his notebook and looked at the husky man who had answered. “And what are you doing here, sir?”

“I live here,” Ross pointed toward the brown door to the hallway. “Upstairs.”

He appeared very agitated. Considering the horrific scene in his hallway and that he obviously knew the victim, this was understandable. Ross began babbling about how he had heard cries for help.

Mitchell Sang and Bruno Pokstis, duty detectives, arrived in Kew Gardens at 4:05 a.m. Based on what Volber relayed in his call in to Sang, Sang had placed a call of his own to Detectives John Carroll and William “Jerry” Byrnes of the Queens Homicide Squad. He also notified his squad boss, Lieutenant Bernard Jacobs.

Mitch Sang was thirty-nine years old, a tall, powerful-looking man with a shaved head. He cut an imposing figure and looked like what he was—a tough, no-nonsense detective. Sang was a duty detective—a generalist, as opposed to his colleagues in the special Queens Homicide Squad. Known as a tireless investigator, he worked his cases with the tenacity and diligence that are the hallmarks of a good detective. Even if this did turn out to be a homicide, Sang would still consider it *his* case.

He felt this even more strongly when he looked down at the young woman lying in the hallway. Regardless of how long they’ve been on the job or how much brutality they’ve seen, few police officers ever become dispassionate about savagery done to women and children. Sang was no exception.

It looked like a sexual assault—an extraordinarily brutal one, heartless both in its violence and in the way the victim had been left, severely wounded, exposed, and helpless. On the floor next to her were falsies from her bra. A used sanitary napkin, presumably picked from between her legs during the assault, had been tossed aside. A crime not only savage, but *bold*. The hallway was separated from the sidewalk by only a single door. The stairs led to the inner doors of two apartments just one floor above. Hardly a secluded location for what had obviously been a massive attack.

The victim was still alive when Detectives John Carroll and Jerry Byrnes of Homicide arrived at 4:20 a.m. The hallway was so narrow that the detectives had to be extra cautious stepping inside so as not to disturb the victim or the crime scene. They leaned in with scanning flashlights as Detective Carroll carefully knelt down to check for signs of life. Sang and Pokstis had already done this, but as the senior homicide investigator at the scene, John Carroll also examined the victim, making mental note of her condition as she had been found.

Carroll was a first-grade detective in the Homicide Squad, a man of intelligence and experience held in high esteem throughout the department. Noting the victim’s injuries—including that she could not speak, could not tell them what happened—Carroll stepped out. He wanted to speak with the people who *could* tell them what happened.

They allowed Sophie Farrar to remain with the victim until the ambulance arrived. The woman lying in the hallway of 82-62 Austin Street still clung to life, so it was not a homicide investigation yet. But these detectives, all seasoned responders to violent crime, had too much experience to believe it could turn out otherwise. They called for patrolmen to secure the scene and for technicians from the Police Laboratory and the Queens Photo Unit.

An ambulance pulled up on Austin Street at 4:25 a.m. Kitty Genovese, unconscious but alive, was lifted onto a stretcher. A shaken Sophie Farrar watched as they carried her friend away.

After the stretcher had been placed in the back of the vehicle, the attendant closed the door and took his place inside. ~~Per the standards of the time, the ambulance was not equipped with any medical devices or supplies (not beyond what could be found in the average person's medicine cabinet).~~ Even if it had been, there was no one aboard to render treatment. The function of the ambulance was to transport the injured. Emergency medical technicians would not become standard personnel in New York City ambulances until the 1970s.

The commotion brought residents out of the warmth of their homes and into the bitter cold of Austin Street. In the ambulance now, Kitty remained isolated from her neighbors. She was no longer crying for their help, no longer sobbing and groping her way down their peaceful tree-lined street. Alone in the back of an ambulance, Kitty Genovese left Kew Gardens for the last time.

LIEUTENANT BERNARD JACOBS, twenty-one-year veteran of the NYPD and commander of the 102nd Detective Squad, arrived in Kew Gardens at 4:30 a.m. As the highest-ranking officer present, Jacobs was in charge of the investigation. He took one look at the size of the apartment building surrounding the crime scene and immediately called for the assistance of duty detectives from thirteen other Queens squads. As with all crimes, particularly of a violent nature, police began canvassing the area right away, knocking on doors and speaking with passersby in search of witnesses. It did not appear there had been anyone passing by, given the time of night, but there were many doors on which to knock. Lieutenant Jacobs told them to start with the Mowbray, that big apartment building across the street.

The onlookers who had come outside to gape at the red lights of the ambulance and the grassy barricades going up around the parking lot represented only the start of the work that lay ahead. In an area so densely populated, it was possible there were witnesses who had not ventured out—nor would they willingly.

But Kew Gardens was one of the good neighborhoods. Detectives and officers who worked the area knew this. Despite its considerable population, which had jumped dramatically over the past two decades, and though only a twenty-minute train ride from Manhattan, Kew Gardens looked more suburban than big city, with its clean streets, the absence of graffiti, and the upscale architecture. You could tell just by looking around that a good class of people lived here. Detectives and officers knew that Kew Gardens wasn't like some of the crime-ridden ghettos up in the Bronx, Brooklyn, or parts of Manhattan. A murder here was an unusual thing, let alone one like this, a brutal knife slaying of a girl. In this city, there were bad neighborhoods where the police wouldn't get any cooperation. Half the residents were criminals *themselves*, for God's sake, the others too scared to talk. Some might even be hiding the perpetrator.

Not here though. Not only were the police sure that the attacker was long gone, they were also sure that if anyone heard or saw anything, they would say so. The good people lived here, the law-abiding citizens—the ones who paid taxes, sent their kids to school, and kept their homes looking nice. They were clean and decent folks. They would step up to the plate. They would cooperate.

That's what the police thought before sunrise on March 13, 1964.

IN BACK OF the Tudor, Mitch Sang and his colleagues were taking information from Kitty's three neighbors who had been present when they arrived. Sophie Farrar had told them her story. Detective would speak with her again, but for now they let the distraught woman go inside to get cleaned up.

The older woman, Greta Schwartz, appeared similarly upset. Like Sophie, she was thin and petite. Her age made her seem all the more fragile.

Mrs. Schwartz explained that she had not heard any screams, that she had been alerted by a phone call. ~~She told them how she had come down and found Kitty, how at first she thought that Kitty had~~ fallen. “Poor Kitty,” she wailed. “That poor girl!”

Indeed. And poor Mrs. Schwartz, having walked unaware into a scene like that.

Detectives were far less moved by the jumpy young man Karl Ross. Ross was thirty-one years old, short, husky, with thinning hair. Ross had called the police. He knew the victim and she had been attacked in his hallway. They had questions for him.

Getting him to *talk* was not a problem, but getting him to say anything of substance was another matter.

Yes, he knew Kitty. They were friends. They talked all the time, had a drink together once in a while. What time did he hear screams? He didn't know. What did he see? Nothing, nothing at all, until he heard something—calls for help it sounded like—in the hallway. Then he opened his door and saw Kitty lying there. Was she alone at that time? Yes. Probably. He thought so. Hard to say, it was dark.

He told them Kitty works at a bar over in Hollis called Ev's Eleventh Hour. She lives in this building, four doors down. Her family lives in Connecticut. Kitty moved here about a year ago with her roommate, Mary Ann Zielonko . . .

He talked fast and freely, about everything except for what happened in the last hour, as if he could drown the detectives in a disingenuous flood of details about Kitty that would wash away their questions about what he had seen and heard of her *this* night. He was maddeningly vague, evasive in spite of his rapid outpouring of words. He mentioned he was a professional poodle trimmer and that he had a professional grooming salon right around the corner on Lefferts Boulevard. He even sold Kitty a dog! Last Christmas Kitty wanted a dog as a gift for her roommate and he found her just the one she wanted, a miniature poodle.

Fantastic. But what had he done for her when she was laying at the bottom of his stairs?

Detective Sang had more to ask Karl Ross, but there was something he had to do first.

ON THIS DAY, which she would remember forever after as the worst of her life, Mary Ann Zielonko awoke to the sound of loud rapping at her door.

Mary Ann was a shy, soft-spoken twenty-five-year-old barmaid who worked the day shift at Club Chris in nearby Springfield Gardens. Blonde and willowy, she was an attractive woman with a delicate look that mirrored the gentle and vulnerable soul within. An assistant district attorney would later describe her as bearing a striking resemblance to movie star Kim Novak.

In a sleepy haze, Mary Ann made her way through the small apartment and opened her front door to face two men she had never seen before. Detective Sang showed her his gold shield. Mary Ann listened as he spoke, but the words were incomprehensible. She wondered if she was still asleep. In her confusion she thought at first he was looking for Kitty. But Kitty was not home, nor had Mary Ann expected her home tonight. Kitty had plans for dinner and drinks with a friend and then planned to stay the night with another friend, Bessie Thompson, who lived above the bar where Kitty worked. What the stranger was telling Mary Ann did not make sense. And it felt surreal, this detective telling her to get dressed and come with him to the hospital.

Mary Ann did not scream. She did not break down. She did not believe. Not yet.

THE RESPONSE TO Lieutenant Jacobs's call for assistance had been swift. By 5:00 a.m. teams of detectives and patrolmen from neighboring precincts in Queens were already fanned out around the vicinity of Austin Street. Detective John Mahoney was one of those assigned to canvass the Mowbray

Apartments.

~~“3:20 a.m.,” the woman said. “That’s when I first heard her scream. I know because I turned on my bedroom light and looked at the clock.”~~ The woman spoke bluntly and with an air of certainty. Her name was Irene Frost, and she lived in a corner apartment on the second floor of the Mowbray, directly across the street from the Tudor building and the train station. Her windows faced Austin Street, giving her a view of both the storefronts along the Tudor and the side of the Tudor building adjacent to the parking lot.

Irene Frost was blonde and in early middle age. She was not a demure woman, nor one to mince words. Detective Mahoney was glad to have found her.

After repeating that she was certain of the time the screams woke her she said that she went to her bedroom window. Looking out across Austin Street, she saw a man and a woman standing in front of the bookstore. Nothing seemed to be happening, so she returned to her bed. But a minute later she heard a woman scream, “Please help me, God! Please help me! I’ve been stabbed!”

This brought Irene Frost to her window once again, where she saw the man run down Austin Street and past the train station before losing sight of him. Going then to her other bedroom window, which was closer to the site of the bookstore across the street, Irene saw the woman on her knees on the pavement, between the bookstore and liquor store. The woman got up, bent over to pick something up from the sidewalk—her pocketbook, Irene thought—and she then walked down Austin Street toward the train station parking lot, the same direction the man had run. Unlike the man who had run by, it took the woman a while to make it down the street. Irene watched her turn the corner by the drugstore. Switching windows once again, to the one with a view of the parking lot, Irene watched the woman walk along the side of the Tudor building and turn the far corner by the coffee shop. Once the woman turned that corner, Irene could no longer see her.

“What happened then?” Detective Mahoney asked.

“I went back to bed.”

IRENE FROST’S ACCOUNT of Kitty Genovese having first been attacked around the corner from where police found her matched what other residents were telling detectives. The forensic evidence backed it up; bloodstains were found on the pavement in front of 82-64 Austin Street, the address of the Austin Book Shop. Long before the first light of dawn on that Friday morning, detectives knew they were dealing not with a single crime scene but with an expanse that stretched from the front of Austin Street to around the block and into a rear entryway of the Tudor building. A young woman’s blood death march.

Detective Frank Frezza of the Queens Photo Unit was a sixteen-year veteran of the NYPD. Detective Frezza was an accomplished photographer in his own right, having learned his trade in the U.S. Navy Photo Unit during World War II. Like many of his colleagues in the detective bureau, Frezza had joined the force after his return from military service. After photographing the hallway, Detective Frezza went around to the front of Austin Street. The bloodstains on the pavement in front of the bookstore were parallel to the main entry of the Mowbray across the street. Noting the large bay window at the Mowbray entrance, and having learned that the Mowbray employed round-the-clock elevator operators stationed in the lobby, detectives were eager to speak with the man on duty. He, however, was not eager to speak with them. As Detective Frezza recalled, the elevator man refused to give any information to police. He wouldn’t even tell them his name. Lieutenant Jacobs tried to talk sense to him, pointing out the severity of the crime and that the least bit of information could be useful, but the man remained stony as the building. He didn’t see anything, he didn’t know anything, and he had nothing to say. An

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